



*He was always a little behind and the scoop had to wait for him*

## Victory

*The simplest thing your eye falls on  
is a story if you get what it means.  
There's a big thrill here*

By BEN AMES  
WILLIAMS

A  
Short  
Short Story

THE concrete mixer sprawled like a beast in that narrow crevice of a street. Regularly it extended, flat upon the ground, with the gesture of an elephant offering his trunk, a great scoop like a mendicant hand. When the scoop was filled, the machine lifted it, tilted the contents into its stomach, and revolved them there in the visible process of digestion. It was impossible not to see in this concrete mixer a sluggish, gluttonous personality. From the windows on either side of the street faces looked out and down to watch it at work. Ten thousand years ago, from safe vantage in the cliffs, men and women watched some similar monster browsing lazily along the valley below.

Fourteen men worked to feed this beast. Six shoveled crushed stone into three wheelbarrows, and three wheeled these barrows to the scoop; two shoveled sand into other barrows, which two others wheeled, and one youth stood beside the scoop, watching each load to be sure the beast's diet was properly balanced, pouring into each mouthful a bag of cement, as a cook adds salt to food.

The oldest man in the feeding crew was one whose task it was to wheel a barrow filled with sand. He was a small, old man, his clothes were too large for him, and he had trouble keeping up with the younger men.

The pile of sand from which he had to wheel his barrow was some distance from the scoop. His way lay along a zigzag of narrow planks. He negotiated the angles with slow care, but there was no time for slow care in his task. Until the scoop held its fit and proper proportions of stone and sand and cement it could not be emptied. Therefore each must do his part or the whole operation lagged.

This old man was always a little behind and the scoop had to wait for him. Now and then the boss, in a derby hat, observing the delay, looked that way.

Under these glances the oldster tried to hurry, and his narrow shoulders seemed to shrink as though he yearned to be inconspicuous; but when five men do their tasks and must wait while the sixth does his, the extra is bound to be the target of their glances. Some of these glances were blank, one or two were scornful, and once one called to the old man impatiently: "Come on, now! Come on!"

The old man came on as best he could. He was too thin to perspire, but his efforts deserved that relief. He was behind, and he fell farther behind, and always grew more weary. His arms pulled at his shoulders, his hands ached, the skin on the inside of his fingers dragged and burned. To flit the handles of the barrow upward when he dumped the sand was an effort enormous and frightful, and his back and thighs quivered under the ordeal. When the barrow was empty the relief was so grateful that on the return trip his strength returned and he had a blessed moment of rest while the shovellers filled the barrow.

But this rest was tormented by the knowledge that the others were already dumping their loads, that the hungry machine waited for his coming.

BY AND BY chance gave him some relief. A truck dumped fresh sand nearer the concrete mixer, and this shortened his journey and enabled him for a while to hold his own. But presently he began once more to fall behind. After all, he was too old. His best efforts were not so good as the steady pace of the younger men. Along the sides of his nose deep lines graved themselves. His lips drew apart, and his breath was inhaled with a whistling sound. Once he volunteered a grin at the young man who presided over the

feeding of the monster, but the young man averted his eyes. This was not done unkindly, yet there was in the simple action something terrifying. The old man bent to his task again.

There were three men wheeling barrows of crushed stone. One of these—broad-shouldered, heavy-hipped, with a touch of red in his hair—had a kindly humor in his eyes. He had watched with increasing admiration the oldster's efforts to keep pace with the younger men, and, whether by plan or chance, he now did something which helped the old man. He left his barrow, and without explanation or permission walked away, so that when next the hungry scoop came down, only two loads of rock awaited it, and after the old man had awaited his sand the scoop had still to be held till more stone could be added.

This alteration in the rhythm of the feeding persisted until he who had departed returned, puffing a fresh pipe, and took up his work again. But the effect of the change was that the old man, instead of being last in the line was now the third. Those behind him kept close upon his heels, but they could not pass him, so that he held his own, and he worked now with fresh zeal.

After a little another chance helped him. The boss called one of the shovellers to drive stakes. This threw double duty on the other shovellers, slowed down the loading of the barrows.

The old man perceived the opportunity. Instead of being far behind the sec-

ond barrow, he was now close upon the heels of him who pushed it. He redoubled his efforts, and after three or four trips beat the other to the plank runway and went into second place. The others no longer paid any heed to him. Since he was not delaying the work, there was nothing to attract their attention; and the old man, thus secure from observation, stole a march on them. He took a shovel to help fill his barrow, and gained a little time that way, and on the second essay gained a little more, and on the third at last reached triumphantly his goal. When he came to the scoop with his load of sand he was the first one to arrive. The young man who controlled the scoop bade him wait for rock to be first thrown in, and the old man released the handles of his barrow and stood erect and wiped his brow with his hand, elate with victory.

That wheeler of stone who had once shouted to urge him to greater haste was now the last in line, and the old man saw this, and he called to him derisively: "Come on, you! Come on!"

No one paid any attention, but the old man grinned at the young man by the scoop, and the young man this time grinned back at him.